Kirk's initial liking for the overmatched boy suffered a setback and he looked skeptical. He knew all about promotional transfers and the shady habit of pawning off your bad apples on someone else with a glowing recommendation. His mind veered back to the just completed match and the reaction of the onlookers.

"Was he fouled?"

"I believe an attempt was made," Spock answered precisely.

"Think I can take him?" Kirk asked in the same tone.

Spock sighed and raised an eyebrow. "I think you are going to try." His tone was resigned.

Kirk grinned. "You don't think I can, do you?"

"Are you proposing a wager, Captain?"

Kirk's jaw dropped and then snapped shut. Would Spock really bet against him?

"You're not trying to hustle me, are you Mr. Spock?"

"Not at all, Captain. You were the one who desired exercise."

"Well, stick around. You might have to pick up the pieces."

T'serek had nodded to his well-wishers and was accepting their compliments with a little frown, as if he didn't approve of them. He held the eye. Skin like a girl's sheathed muscle and bone that would have done credit to classical statuary. He had a stinging vitality, even in repose, and as he turned to face Kirk, the Captain mentally gave him the only word for it--beauty. T'serek had that perilous perfection that cannot be denied. His hair was dark chestnut, his clear skin fair, his eyes gray with a red-brown ring in the iris. Although his features were strongly marked--heavy brows, straight nose, sensual mouth--they lacked expression, or suppressed it. Kirk suspected he took a serious view of life.

"That was good work, T'serek. You want to push your luck?" Kirk's most engaging smile took the sting out of the challenge.

The boy looked doubtful. "I'd be taking advantage, Captain. I'm a Guthrie, heavy-worlder."

"We'll split the difference at a G and a half."

The boy still hesitated, so Kirk pushed a little harder. "If you don't break anything McCoy can't fix, neither will I." He stepped back onto the mats, bracing himself under the onslaught of half again his own weight and saw that Spock had moved to the controls of the grav-comp. T'serek nodded and stepped forward.

Kirk was conscious of the faces closing in around the square and of the pleasant thrum of his own blood, the adrenalized clarity of his vision. It had to be good for you.

T'serek closed at once without preliminaries and Kirk felt a sudden strain on his shoulder and then the whap! of the mat against his back. He shook his head and blinked up at his opponent. God, the boy was fast. Ruefully he held a hand up, and when the boy reached down to help him up, Kirk locked his elbow, kicked to the thigh and sent him cartwheeling over his head. He heard the impact with satisfaction as he came to his feet, but T'serek bounced up like a rubber ball.

"Rule number one," said Kirk, "don't count your man out too soon."

This bout was proving a greater attraction than the first. Only the lean science officer seemed indifferent to the outcome as he watched with folded arms and a slightly tilted head.

"It's not fair," someone said in the press. "The Old Man's carrying half a G extra and Dray's fighing light." "Ain't no such thing as a fair fight, son," came the drawled reply.

The final throw came almost too fast to see, and the bystanders felt the impact in the soles of their feet. Kirk lay limp, unconscious, and a panting T'serek stood warily back, his expression apologetic as the looked at the first officer.

Spock thumbed the gravity controls back to normal, dipped in a bucket for a sponge, and stepped onto the mat and thoughtfully squeezed the water into Kirk's face.

Kirk sputtered, shook his head, and rolled up on one elbow. He wiped his eyes and looked at T'serek, who stood at a safe distance with one hand pressed to his side. Kirk ran his hand down his jaw, gently.

"What'd he hit me with?"

"The deck, Captain," was Spock's composed reply.

"So I see. You all right, T'serek?" Kirk seemed in no hurry to get up.

"Maybe some loose ribs, sir."

Kirk nodded. "I thought I felt something give. You want to try Spock?"

T'serek looked surprised, then flattered. A flush rose over his cheekbones. He shook his head reluctantly. "Not today, sir."

"OK. We'll try it together sometime. Help me up."

Ignoring Spock, Kirk reached up toward T'serek. The boy's guarded glance at the hard floor beyond Kirk was perfectly readable, but he set his jaw and reached down. There was a moment of electrical suspense, then Kirk came lightly up, balancing on one foot.

"Good. I think I sprained my ankle. We'd better get your ribs checked, too. Spock?" And with a hand on each shoulder, Kirk hopped happily away from the best workout he'd had in weeks.

McCoy wasn't surprised to see them. "What now?" he asked as they maneuvered through the door.

"T'serek's ribs and my ankle. I had a good workout."

"Better you than me," said McCoy. The tricorder went from Kirk's ankle to T'serek's side."You have a sprain," he told Kirk, "and you look like you've been making love to a grizzly. Who won?"

"Nobody wins a workout, Bones," Kirk protested.

"That means the other guy did."

Kirk laughed. "He certainly did. We're going to mop up the floor with Spock next week."

"What do you say to that, Spock?" asked McCoy as he fiddled with his equipment.

"I believe the colloquial expression, Doctor, is 'them and how many more?'"

McCoy finished his ministrations and grudgingly handed out two small pills apiece to Kirk and T'serek. "Take those at bedtime. You'll be alright, Jim, it does some people good to get knocked